# How children learn - Book 2

by Linda Pound

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# Introduction

**This book, a sequel to How Children Learn, shares many of its features. It also attempts to explain a range of theories about children's learning. It seeks to promote the reflective practice which is a vital characteristic of professionalism. It sets out to encourage you to think about why you do what you do in your important work with children.**

As we saw in *How Children Learn*, theories can be developed from research and experimentation or they may be drawn from philosophy or hypothetical ideas. Whatever their basis, the importance of observation is a common strand. All the theories explored in this book were developed by theorists who observed how people, including children, learn.

In the first book, the focus was largely on individual theorists (such as Lev Vygotsky and Margaret Donaldson). In addition, there were some sections dedicated to renowned educational movements (such as High/Scope and Te Whariki) or important elements of education and learning (such as brain development, emotional intelligence and learning through play). In this, the second book, the central theme remains children's learning, but there is an attempt to focus more firmly on trends and developments rather than individual theorists. It looks, for example, at the way in which ancient theories of learning both in the classical world and the east have shaped current views about the way in which children learn. It also considers the way in which ideas about how children learn to read and talk have developed and changed over time.

This underlines the way in which theories change. Each theorist builds on other people's ideas. This can be seen, for example, in considering the way in which theories about creativity have developed over time. In many sections the impact of the social and political context can be seen. With the development of each new theory, understanding grows and changes.

## About this book

- As far as possible, the order in which theories have developed and evolved is reflected in the order in which they are presented within each section. You should not assume from this that as new theories develop, the others fade away. As was shown in *How Children Learn*, Skinner's behaviourist theories were developed later than Piaget's. This did not mean however that behaviourism demolished Piaget's ideas of the child as a scientist, constructing knowledge. Far from it. In fact, Piaget's theories continue to be more influential than those of Skinner among theorists. Skinner's behaviourist theory is widely regarded as too simplistic to explain human behaviour. On the other hand, in many aspects of life behaviourism remains the basis of how adults approach children's learning. If you have heard yourself saying to a child, 'if you eat your peas, you can have a sweet' you have been making use of behaviourist theory.

- Most sections follow a similar format. Key dates and key figures are identified and a concluding comment section draws some conclusions. The section on the ancient theories of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Confucius has a slightly different shape since it is looking at their work individually. In

this case, a comment section makes some reference to the impact of their work as a whole.

- You will find many connections both with the theories outlined in *How Children Learn* and with other sections of this book. Any such links are highlighted in order to help you explore the connections which will help you to understand and make sense of these complex ideas. The many overlaps and connections which you will find remind us that good ideas do not emerge from just one person but that human thinking links with other thinking. It also links with events and issues which constantly face us. So, for example, in several sections you will notice the impact of war on society's view of what education is for.

- This book covers vast areas of theory and understanding. This means that it can be no more than a brief introduction to the ideas explored, designed to whet your appetite so that you want to find out more for yourself. Most importantly, the book aims to encourage you to link these theories to your observations of children so that you can better analyse and understand how children learn.

**Note to students:**
Every effort has been made to make sure that you have all the information you will need to cite sources in your essays and projects. You will need to rearrange these references in your written work in order to meet the demands of tutors and accreditation bodies. Before you hand in your assignments, double check that you have met the requirements of your particular course or place of study.

There is guidance in each section to help you track down further information for yourself. The information in this book is by no means the end of the story. There is much more to be read, discussed and learned from the work of the remarkable figures introduced in these pages. Because the book often takes an historical overview, some of the books referred to are no longer in print. This means that you should check with your library to see whether they can help you to access some of these texts.

**Two words of warning:**
Be very careful about accurate referencing – your written work should include a reference to all sources that you have used in your written work. Carelessness could lead to you being accused of plagiarism – a very serious matter.

Secondly, use websites with caution. Some offer excellent information, others offer misleading, incomplete or simply wrong information. Always think about who has published the information and what their motive might be.

Any website addresses provided were valid at the time of going to press.

# The development of theories about how children learn to read and write

## INTRODUCTION

**Becoming literate is of great importance in the modern world and governments place great emphasis on learning to read and write. In this section the development of theories and approaches to learning to read and write is outlined.**

## KEY DATES

**1870-1913**
**Edmund Burke Huey**

**1922**
**Publication of Beacon Readers**

**1926-2007**
**Marie Clay**

**1961**
**Introduction of Initial Teaching Alphabet**

**1975**
**Publication of the Bullock Report**

**1999**
**Introduction of National Literacy Strategy**

**2005**
**Publication of the Rose Review**

## Developing theories

The introduction of new approaches can be seen to follow a clear pattern but this does not mean that all schools and all teachers either took up new methods or discarded old ones. All that can be firmly identified are emerging trends. Analysis of approaches in America suggested that in broad terms whole word (or look and say) methods were predominant from1940–1970; phonic methods from1970–1990; and whole language (or language experience) methods from 1990 onwards. In Britain phonic approaches (in particular what is known as synthetic phonics) are currently being strongly emphasised. However, it would be wrong to think that phonics teaching had ever disappeared.

### The alphabetic method

Amongst the earliest known materials for teaching reading in this country are hornbooks (1), so named because the writing was protected by a thin sheet of animal horn. Hornbooks were probably introduced towards the end of the fourteenth century and included the letters of the alphabet shown in both upper and lower case and familiar prayers such as the Lord's Prayer. In this method children were taught the names of the letters and to recite them. Later, in the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, methods focused on the tactile approach of feeling the letter shapes by, for example, children tracing their fingers around sandpaper letters. To this day they are encouraged to play with magnetic and foam letters in order to become familiar with the shapes.

While the alphabetic method emphasises letter names (eg. 'C', 'A', 'T' spells cat), many practitioners today believe that children need to know letter names ('a' as in able) at the same time as they are being introduced to the sounds that they make ('a' as in cat). Research undertaken in the 1970s (2) suggested that children who appeared to learn to read without formal instruction at a very early age usually knew the names of the letters, but that this had come about as a result of learning to read, rather than as a preparation for it. It is also apparent that some children able to read fluently are not able to decipher decontextualized letters.

### The beginnings of the phonics method

Phonics were introduced in the middle of the nineteenth century. The examples from early primers underline how tedious and meaningless this approach can be, but some children clearly did learn to read by this method. This example comes from a book published in 1913 (3):

1. is it in?
2. or is it on?
3. it is an ox
4. an ox is at it

Phonic reading schemes were introduced in the 1920s with the publication of Beacon Readers in 1922. By the 1940s and 1950s, many teachers had become disillusioned with phonics approaches and begun to move towards whole word and whole sentence methods.

## Whole word methods

The focus on meaning which was developing from progressive approaches to education, particularly in the period between the two world wars and from the work of John Dewey (see *How Children Learn* pages 21–22), led to the introduction of a whole word method. Children were encouraged to focus on the shape of words in order to remember them. In addition they were introduced to words which were particularly interesting or important to children (such as their names or mum) or which had a distinctive shape (such as aeroplane or elephant).

One such approach, developed by Schonell, led to the introduction of a reading test which remained influential for many years. One hundred words beginning with tree, little, milk, egg, book, school, sit, frog, playing and bun and ending with metamorphosis, somnambulist, bibliography and idiosyncrasy were used to determine a child's reading age. Schonell suggests that (4) words are learnt through aural means (saying and hearing words); meaning; writing (physical reinforcement); and most importantly through the visual pattern.

## Whole sentence methods

One important aspect of psychological thinking in this period is known as the Gestalt school of psychology. Their emphasis is on seeing things as a whole – suggesting that our brains make sense or meaning of things that are incomplete by making them whole. For example, in many cartoons a few carefully placed pen strokes will convey a particular image – our brains fill in the gaps. This theory led to whole sentence approaches to the teaching of reading. The rationale was that the context about which children were reading would help them to fill in the words they did not know. Advocates of this method would cite examples in which experienced readers skip over inaccuracies in print, often without even noticing them. Perhaps you've been caught out by sentences such as:

Flowers will bloom in the
the spring.

### Criticisms of whole word and sentence methods

Whole word methods were generally taught through the use of flash cards, which did not fit comfortably with the more progressive methods of teaching which were being developed in the 1950s. Flash cards use a rote method of learning and rely on a behaviourist approach – such as Skinner used to train rats and pigeons (see *How Children Learn* pages 42–43). Children respond to the stimulus of the flash card being shown and learning is reinforced by the teacher's enthusiasm or praise (or perhaps punished by not collecting as many cards successfully read as other children in the group). The approaches were also seen as making children too dependent on adults – the only way to decipher an unknown word was, it was suggested, to ask the teacher.

## The return of phonics methods

In the 1950s, Daniels and Diack introduced the Royal Road reading scheme. This scheme is still available but it has always been more used by older children having difficulties with reading than by young children in the early stages of learning to read. It focuses on what have come to be known as CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words such as tip, top, tap, tin, and tub.

This scheme or approach also led to a widely used reading test. Words such as on, in, hot, hat, jam and him are used and, based on the number of words children can correctly identify, they are given a reading age.

## Research-based methods of learning to read

From the 1960s onwards a number of new approaches emerged. There was widespread dissatisfaction with existing methods creating a receptive audience for the range of new methods which began to emerge. The first two described below are probably the best known.

### The Initial Teaching Alphabet

One of these innovative approaches was developed by Sir James Pitman and published in 1961. It was known as the Initial Teaching Alphabet (ITA) and was based on a new alphabet. Twenty-four of the existing twenty-six letters of the alphabet are used – omitting q and x. Twenty additional characters were added so that all the sounds of the English language could be individually represented. Although it is claimed that only 13% of English words do not use standard correspondence between sounds and letters, the main reason for developing this approach was to make spelling more systematic.

ŧhe ies ænjel
gav ŧhe oul a rŋ

Can you read what this says? (5)

By the time the Bullock Report into reading was published in 1975, 9% of schools were using ITA. The expectation was that children and their parents would be able to read and write using ITA by the age of seven – at which point there was to be a gradual shift towards using standard spelling and letters.

Despite high levels of publicity, by the mid-1980s ITA had virtually disappeared. It is claimed that one of the reasons for this failure was that, at a time when the range and variety of children's books were growing, there were relatively few books published using ITA. A widely cited reason for its lack of success is the claim by many people who were introduced to ITA at the start of their schooling, that the transition to the standard alphabet was not without a number of difficulties. Many children appeared to have great difficulty in learning to spell in standard ways.

Solution to ITA text: The ice angel gave the owl a ring.

**Key words**

In 1968, a reading scheme was published by Ladybird, the publishers of a wide range of children's books. The series was based on research which identified the most commonly used words in the English language, drawing on children's and adult's books as well as children's speech. The authors claimed (6) that twelve words (a, and, he, I, in, is, it, of, that, the, to, was) make up over a quarter of the total number of words used in books and children's spoken language. These twelve words together with a further 88 words make up over half of such language. The next most frequently used twenty words include all, as, at, be, but, are, for, had, have, him, his, not, on, one, said, so, they, we, with, and you. As these are all very short words, without distinctive patterns, it is clear that children would not be able to rely on the visual patterns favoured by whole word methods. They are also almost entirely words without clear meaning – a little better than the 'it is an ox' of the early phonics methods (see previous section on alphabetic methods) but